

**What If Your Mother's Day Isn't a Hallmark Movie?
The Book of Ruth**

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May 14, 2017

Text Introduction: The book of Judges and 1 Samuel is separated by Ruth, which gives an account of a "bright spot" for Israel in the days of the judges. Ruth points to the theological truth that God is still sovereign and in control, even in the darkest days of rebellion and sin. The Book of Ruth is also one of the most beautiful stories in the Bible, but it is in the beginning a very difficult story. The first five verses spell that out for us.

Text: During the time of the judges, there was a famine in the land. A man left Bethlehem in Judah with his wife and two sons to live in the land of Moab for a while. 2 The man's name was Elimelech, and his wife's name was Naomi. The names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They entered the land of Moab and settled there. 3 Naomi's husband Elimelech died, and she was left with her two sons. 4 Her sons took Moabite women as their wives: one was named Orpah and the second was named Ruth. After they lived in Moab about 10 years, 5 both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two children and without her husband.

Introduction: Some of our dearest friends ever in ministry were Tom and Nan Hudson. They loved us and we loved them. In our newly-wed and no children days of ministry, they were more like grandparents to us. I couldn't help but think again of Nan in preparation for this morning. While I was her pastor, she greeted me one Mother's Day morning with her eagerness to hear my Mother's Day message. Nan had not looked at the bulletin yet, because I was not planning to preach a message in any way associated with Mother's Day. I sort of panicked as I told her I was continuing our series on Revelation or something like that. I will never forget the look on her face.

The truth is that Mother's Day for many is a hard day. Maybe it is a hard day for you today. Sooner or later, Mother's Day will be hard for you. You might find yourself asking, "What if my Mother's Day is not a Hallmark movie?"

Have you ever wanted to ask that question about your family? What happened? I can hear someone saying, "He was 10 years old and everything was fine. He loved to come to church. He did well in school. But something happened?" Or, someone might say, "I don't know what happened? We used to love each other. We had a happy marriage. I thought everything was fine, but he says he doesn't love me anymore." What happened to my family? Sooner or later you might have to ask that question.

Naomi had every right to ask that question. Ruth could too for that matter. After a couple of names and places in verses 1-3, verses 4 and 5 kind of have a staccato-like feel filled with a series of events that could simply be labeled, "Bad News."

The Story: A Tragedy

The Bible tells us that at some point in this time of the judges, there was a famine in the land of Promise. (Ruth 1:1). Living in Bethlehem (a town that means by the way, the house of bread), there was a man by

the name of Elimelech (God is my King) and his wife, Naomi (Sweet One). They had two sons—Mahlon and Chilion. By the way, Mahlon means “sickly” and Chilion means “frail.” Can’t you see it? It’s a rather sad tale. “Hello, my name is ‘God is my King’ and this is my wife, ‘Sweet One.’ We are from the ‘House of Bread,’ but we left there, because there was a famine in the land, and we were about to starve to death. Meet our two kids, ‘Sickly’ and ‘Frail.’” The old line, “If it weren’t for bad luck, I’d have no luck at all” comes to mind. We might laugh, but believe me they weren’t laughing. It could be that their move to the land of Moab was specifically tied to Elimelech’s doubts about God. Moab was a place known for great sin against God. This family went to the land of Moab, outside of the land of Promise, back across the Jordan River and on the other side of the Dead Sea. Not long after being there, Elimelech died. The sons married women from the land of Moab—one named Orpah and one named Ruth. Not long after that and before any children were born, Mahlon and Chilion died.

No Hallmark movie, I assure you.

So, what do you do if your Mother’s Day is no Hallmark movie? Let’s see several things in the text today.

- **Expect a life filled with Challenges.**

John Piper noted, “The life of the godly is not a straight line to glory.” Jesus said, “I have told you these things so that in Me you may have peace. You will have suffering in this world. Be courageous I have conquered the world.” (John 16:33)

There is a lot happening in Ruth 1:1, and it gives us some pieces of the puzzle of the challenges of life. This was the time of the judges. There was a famine. They decided to go to Moab.

These three phrases give us the source of life’s challenges.

- Cultural Sources

The last verse of Judges gives us a good summary of the phrase, “During the time of the judges. Judges 21:25 concludes the book with a recurring theme of the whole book. “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did whatever he wanted. Earlier in the book, in Judges 2:10-12, we get this summary: “That whole generation was also gathered to their ancestors (after Joshua is the reference point). After them another generation rose up who did not know the Lord or the works He had done for Israel. The Israelites did what was evil in the Lord’s sight. They worshipped the Baals and abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They went after other gods from the surrounding peoples and bowed down to them. “

Part of the challenges that your family faces is because of the cultural sources about us.

- Natural Forces

Then, there are natural forces. We have had them. They are indiscriminate and beyond our control, but can and will control us if we let them.

- Personal Choices

And, sometimes our challenges are our own doing, like moving to Moab. Moab had its beginning in Genesis 19. There is no more horrific reading in the Bible than Genesis 19. Sodom is destroyed leaving only Lot and his two virgin daughters. Fearing that they will not have anybody to marry, have children with, and receive their inheritance by, Lot's daughters get him drunk, have relations with him, and have children by him. One of those sons is named Moab. The people of Moab never got over this sordid beginning. The people of Moab were notorious for their debauchery and immorality.

Our own choices cause some of our challenges.

- **Engage in Christ-Honoring Relationships.**

Naomi decided that it would be best to leave the land of Moab. She had heard that the famine had ended, so she prepared to go back to Bethlehem. After starting on the journey, Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Look, you go back home. You don't have to come with me. I don't have any more sons to offer you." Orpah did return, but Ruth responded with a beautiful rebuttal to her mother-in-law's kind offer:

¹⁶ But Ruth replied:

Do not persuade me to leave you
or go back and not follow you.
For wherever you go, I will go,
and wherever you live, I will live;
your people will be my people,
and your God will be my God.

¹⁷ Where you die, I will die,
and there I will be buried.
May the Lord do this to me,
and even more,
if anything but death separates you and me.

And, that's how Naomi and Ruth arrived back in Bethlehem.

We also learn in the text that Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem right at the time of the barley harvest. Needing to provide for the two of them, Ruth goes off to a field to gather grain. Her plan is to go behind the hired harvesters and pick up what they leave behind. It so happens that she chooses the field of a man named Boaz, who just so happens to be a relative on her deceased father-in-law's side. Having already heard of Ruth's loyalty to her mother-in-law, Boaz sees to it that no one bothers her and that she picks up plenty of grain.

When Ruth returns home that night, Naomi is amazed at the amount of food she has been able to collect. She wants to know how this happened. Ruth tells her about Boaz. Naomi says, "Boaz! He is a close relative. In fact, he is one of our family's kinsman-redeemers." Now, we don't know what that term means, but in this ancient setting, a kinsman-redeemer was of great importance. According to the law that Moses had received from God, a kinsman-redeemer could be called on to do any or all of three things.

1. To redeem property and/or relatives—In Israel, all property was a family possession. If property had to be sold, the kinsman-redeemer was called on to buy back the property for the family.
2. To provide an heir through marriage—If a man died without an heir, it was the brother's duty to marry the widow for the purposes of providing an heir.
3. To avenge the unlawful death of a family member.¹

This is where the love story evolves. (OK, maybe it does become a little bit like a Hallmark movie, but better, actually) Boaz fulfills this role as the kinsman-redeemer both out of obligation, but also out of desire.

All of this is as comes as a result of a decision by Ruth to engage in Godly relationships. See, when life gets challenging for us, I am afraid that one of our reactions is to shut down and shut people out of our lives. In reality, we should be doing just the opposite.

- **Eliminate the Conclusion that there is no hope.**

This beautiful love story almost got derailed by Naomi's hopelessness. We see that hopelessness in 1:11-14 and then again in 1:20-21. Naomi had lost everything, but the greatest thing she had lost was her hope.

Hopelessness is the enemy of faith.

When I think about hope I always think about a story about the little boy playing Little League baseball. He is out in the field when his father arrives late for the game. Through the fence his father asks, "What's the score?" "18-0!" says the little boy, "We're losing." Trying to offer comfort his dad says, "I'm sorry, son." With the hope only a Little Leaguer could have, he answers back, "Don't worry, Dad, we haven't even got up to bat yet!" Now that's hope.

Billy Graham once said, "The greatest need in our world today is the need for hope. We thrive on hope, we rejoice in hope, we witness in hope, knowing that experience works hope. 'Happy is he . . . whose hope is in the Lord his God (Psalm 146:5).' There is hope for the future. It is centered in the Person of Jesus Christ who died for our sins and rose from the grave and is alive now. I have staked all that I am or ever hope to be on Him." At yet another occasion, Graham said, "Faith points us beyond our problems to the hope we have in Christ."

- **Exercise faith in all Circumstances.**

Everything Ruth does, she does by faith. We exercise faith by faith. We exercise faith when we don't necessarily have a lot of faith.

- **Be Eager for God to have the Climactic Word.**

The story of Ruth ends with the announcement of the marriage of Ruth and Boaz and the announcement of the birth of their son—Obed.

¹ Adam. T. Barr, *Exploring the Story: A Reference Companion*, Zondervan Press, 56.

“All of a sudden we realize that all along something far greater has been in the offing than we could imagine. God was not only plotting for the temporal blessing of a few Jews in Bethlehem. He was preparing for the coming of the greatest king that Israel would have, David. And the name of David carries with it the hope of the Messiah, the new age, peace, righteousness, freedom from pain and crying and grief and guilt. This simple little story opens out like a stream into a great river of hope. (John Piper, “The Best is Yet to Come,” online sermon dated, July 22, 1984)

Listen, I don't know what you are going through today. I don't know if today is like a Hallmark movie for you or like a Horror movie for you, but I do know and believe by faith that God is always at work. One of the ways that He is at work is that He is drawing you to Himself. Until we profess our faith in Him, He is drawing us, sometimes through tragedy and sometimes through triumph, sometimes through pain and sometimes in pleasure. Once we are saved, He continues to be at work in our lives to sanctify us—to make us more holy—to make us more like Him. Let Him do that. Trust Him to do that in your life and the lives of those you love.